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When the Past Lies Ahead and the Future Lags Behind

Backward Narration in Film, Television, and Literature

MATTHIAS BRÜTSCH

Anyone who has ever taught film seminars when VHS tapes were still in use knows from experience that a sleepy classroom may suddenly awaken and become animated when a backwards image search is carried out in order to find a particular scene.¹ The sudden arousal and laughter this manoeuvre almost inevitably triggers is a first indication that the reversal of processes we are used to seeing unfold in a forward direction draws immediate attention and has the power to irritate or to amuse.

In dealing with backward narration, I will start with the premise that the chronological sequence and forward movement in time is not only the order followed by the vast majority of novels and films, but also a kind of default value automatically activated by readers and viewers in the absence of clear signs suggesting an alternative structure. The reversal of chronology or time's arrow is exceptional and defies our norms of perception and cognition. To what extent it also has a disorienting effect is one of the questions the following typology of backward narrations seeks to answer. After distinguishing the different types of storytelling in reverse, I will focus on issues of reception, narrative perspective, as well as dramatic structure and their orienting or disorienting effects. Themes and genres linked to reverse narratives are further topics that will be addressed. Finally, there will be some speculative remarks on the possible reasons for the increasing popularity of this extraordinary narrative form around the turn of the millennium in both television (with episodes from SEINFELD (USA 1989–1998, NBC, S9/E08), STAR TREK: VOYAGER (USA 1995–2001, UPN, S3/E21), THE X FILES (USA/Canada 1993–2002, Fox, S8/E06), and ER (USA 1994–2009, NBC, S9/E10)) and film (MEMENTO (USA 2000, Christopher Nolan), BAKHA SATANG (PER-

1 | I would like to thank Henry M. Taylor for helpful comments and the revision of the English text.

PERMINT CANDY, South Korea/Japan 2000, Lee Chang-dong), *IRRÉVERSIBLE* (France 2002, Gaspar Noé), *5X2* (France 2004, François Ozon), and *ETERNAL SUNSHINE OF THE SPOTLESS MIND* (USA 2004, Michel Gondry)).

DIFFERENT TYPES OF BACKWARD NARRATION

A good way to separate the different kinds of reverse narrative is to ask, what exactly is moving backwards in backward narrations? Is it the process of narration itself? Is it the plot, i.e. the order in which story events are presented? Or is it the events of the narrated story themselves? As to the first question, it would seem to be a fundamental rule that the actual act of narration cannot regress—unless the viewer reverses it, which is only possible in some cases.² This leaves us with only two viable options: either the events are reversed at the level of plot, or they really unfold backwards in the story.

The second question to ask is what pattern the reverse narratives follow. In a majority of cases the reversing only affects the order in which the episodes are presented and not the events within the episodes themselves, which unfold in a normal forward manner. In some cases, however, the reversing takes the form of a continuous backward movement involving each event of the story.³ Following Chatman (2009, 33f.), I will call the former 'episodically reversed' and the latter 'sustained reversed narratives'.

Both oppositions with two alternatives each result in a total of four options (see fig. 1) with options 1a (the plot presents the scenes in reversed order) and 2b (the events in the story unfold continuously backwards) being more common than options 1b (the narration continuously reverses each story event) and

2 | To read a novel backwards is rather difficult, VHS and DVD players on the other hand offer the possibility of at least playing the image track in reverse mode. Special DVD editions of *MEMENTO* (Sony Pictures Home Entertainment, 2002) and *SEINFELD: BETRAYAL* (Sony Pictures Home Entertainment, 2009) contain a version of the narrative presented in chronological order, but I would argue that these cases are better understood as narratives of their own than as a reversal of the original (backward) narration.

3 | In order to remain comprehensible, dialogue is sometimes nevertheless "episodically reversed" (with sentences being spoken forwards but their order being regressive).

4 | In *STASTNY KONEC* and *Time's Arrow* the sustained reversal takes place at the level of both narrative discourse and story (at least as far as the experience of the homodiegetic character narrator is concerned).

Figure 1: Four Kinds of Reversals.

Reversal	1. Narrative discourse/plot	2. Events in the story
a) episodic	<p>Films:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>BETRAYAL</i> (UK 1983, David Hugh Jones) • <i>TWO FRIENDS</i> (Australia 1986, Jane Campion) • <i>MEMENTO</i> • <i>BAKHA SATANG</i> • <i>IRRÉVERSIBLE</i> • <i>5X2</i> • <i>KILLING THE CHICKENS TO SCARE THE MONKEYS</i> (Sweden 2011, Jens Assur) <p>TV Series:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>SEINFELD</i> (S9/E08: <i>BETRAYAL</i>, USA 1997) • <i>ER</i> (S9/E10: <i>HINDSIGHT</i>, USA 2002) <p>Literature/Theatre:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Goodbye to the Past</i> (1934) • <i>Christopher Himm</i> (1965) • <i>Betrayal</i> (1978) 	<p>Film:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>ETERNAL SUNSHINE OF THE SPOTLESS MIND</i> (partly) <p>TV Series:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>STAR TREK: VOYAGER</i> (S3/E21: <i>BEFORE AND AFTER</i>, USA 1997) • <i>THE X FILES</i> (S8/E06: <i>REDRUM</i>, USA/Canada 2000) • <i>SLIDERS</i> (S2/E13: <i>AS TIME GOES BY</i>, USA 1996)
b) sustained	<p>Films:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • (<i>STASTNY KONEC</i>/HAPPY END, Czechoslovakia 1967, Oldrich Lipsky)⁴ • <i>TIBBAR</i> (Netherlands 2004, Leo Wentink) • <i>REWIND</i> (India 2007, Atul Taishe) <p>Literature:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • (<i>Time's Arrow</i>, 1991) 	<p>Films:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • (<i>STASTNY KONEC</i>) • <i>RÜCKWÄRTS</i> (Germany 1980, René Perraudin) • <i>NIE SOLO SEIN</i> (Germany 2003, Jan Schomburg) • <i>EVOL</i> (UK 2006, Chris Vincze) • <i>THE CURIOUS CASE OF BENJAMIN BUTTON</i> (USA 2008, David Fincher) <p>TV Series:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>RED DWARF</i> (S3/E01: <i>BACKWARDS</i>, UK 1989) <p>Literature:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Spiegelgeschichte</i> (1949) • <i>Counter-Clock World</i> (1967) • <i>The Curious Case of Benjamin Button</i> (1922) • (<i>Time's Arrow</i>)

2a (episodes in the story are experienced in regressing order by some of the characters).⁵

In order to illustrate this typology I will give an example for each variant: 1a) Elaine says good night to Jerry and leaves his hotel room. Intertitle: "One Hour Earlier". The two characters are seated in the hotel room, Jerry hands over a full glass of gin and says "Bless you!" Elaine says "Thank you!" and empties the glass. Intertitle: "Three Seconds Earlier". Jerry pours gin in a glass and Elaine sneezes.

In this scene from the SEINFELD-episode *BETRAYAL*, the events in the fictional world unfold in a straightforward manner, but for us as spectators they are episodically reversed—a pattern made fun of here by the brevity of the "episodes" and the play with ambiguities.

2a) *REDRUM*, an episode from the TV series *THE X FILES*, begins with the main character Martin waking up in a prison cell without remembering what has happened in the past few days. The next morning he is brought to court where the judge orders his imprisonment. Another day 'later', his attorney comes to see him to discuss the strategy for the impending court hearing. Martin is confused until he finds out that each morning after waking up he has moved one day into the past instead of the future. In other words: the order in which the days follow each other is reversed, but contrary to option 1a this reversal is experienced by the character in the fictional world and does not only relate to the plot.

1b) The short film *REWIND* begins as follows: The camera slowly moves downward until it faces a man who sits at a table in front of a small heap of diamonds and a scattered set of gambling cards. The man is smoking but the cigarette is getting longer instead of shorter and absorbing smoke instead of exuding it. He pushes half of the diamonds to the other side of the table, takes a gun and aims at a man lying on the floor who is suddenly lifted up with his chair and comes to life while the sound of a shot resonates through the room. Next, the man points his gun at his own head and a faint click can be heard.

REWIND is an example of sustained backward presentation of events. Within this category it represents a special case only possible in audiovisual narration since the backward representation (of a gang of robbers playing Russian roulette) on the image track is opposed to a normal forward account by the character narrator's voice-over on the sound track.

2b) The short film *RÜCKWÄRTS* presents an episode in the life of a somewhat peculiar man. After a lengthy morning workout, breakfast and bath, he leaves his house and realises with irritation that everybody he encounters is walking

5 | Chatman (2009, 33) only distinguishes between a and b ("episodic" versus "continuous reversal") and Marie-Laure Ryan (2009, 142f.) solely distinguishes between 1 and 2 ("narratives that tell stories in reverse chronological order" versus "reversed time narratives").

backwards and speaking an incomprehensible gibberish. Puzzled by what is going on around him, he bumps into several people, causes a commotion, and is finally arrested by the police.

In this example, processes in the fictional world are happening backwards, but this reversal (of a sustained kind) neither affects all the fictional characters (the protagonist acts in a normal 'forward mode') nor every aspect of time's arrow (although the movements and dialogue of the police officers are reversed, their actions follow a normal 'forward' logic and causality, or else they would not have arrested but released the main character and ought to have done so prior to and not after the tumult).

RÜCKWÄRTS therefore shows that films with reversals within the diegesis always raise the question what exactly and who is going backwards. In *THE CURIOUS CASE OF BENJAMIN BUTTON*, for instance, it is only the ageing process of the main character. In the short film *NIE SOLO SEIN*, dialogue, movements and ageing processes are reversed for all characters except the protagonist. And in the episode *BACKWARDS* from the science-fiction TV series *RED DWARF*, movements, historical time, causality and ageing are reversed, but only for the inhabitants of planet Earth. Rather than being all-embracing, reversals within the fictional world are usually quite selective as to which characters and which aspects of time's arrow are affected (see Ryan 2009, 145).⁶

If not only movement, dialogue or ageing processes but (historical) time is reversed (if, in other words, Monday follows Tuesday and the First World War follows the Second), the question arises whether the backward movement has to be understood as a re-experiencing or even undoing of events already lived through, which is explicitly the case in *Spiegelgeschichte*, *Counter-Clock World* (time reversal 1986) and *THE X FILES: REDRUM*, and implicitly in *Time's Arrow* and *STASTNY KONEC*.⁷

6 | Reversals on the level of narrative discourse can also be selective, as demonstrated by *MEMENTO*, *THE RULES OF ATTRACTION* (USA/Germany 2002, Roger Avery), or *ETERNAL SUNSHINE OF THE SPOTLESS MIND* in presenting only part of the story in reverse order.

7 | Although these examples differ from time travel narratives like *THE TERMINATOR* (USA 1984, James Cameron) or *BACK TO THE FUTURE* (USA 1985, Robert Zemeckis) in that their movement into the past is not a one-time leap but continuous, they share some features of what Catherine Gallagher (2002) has called the "undoing plot," including the "grandmother paradox" that goes with it.

ALIGNMENT AND DISSOCIATION

How time is structured in backward narration has direct implications as to narrative perspective.⁸ Narrative reversals can lead to both alignment and dissociation between spectators/readers and characters. Analysing the examples listed in the bibliography and mediography, I found three different forms of alignment: first, examples with spatiotemporal attachment (and partly subjective access) to a character who moves, lives or ages backwards while all the other characters 'operate' in the usual forward manner (STAR TREK: VOYAGER: BEFORE AND AFTER, THE X FILES: REDRUM, THE CURIOUS CASE OF BENJAMIN BUTTON); or conversely, to a character who is forward-oriented while all the others move backwards (RÜCKWÄRTS, NIE SOLO SEIN). This kind of alignment presupposes that processes of reversal take place within the story and not just on the level of narrative discourse. Second, there are examples in which the episodic reversal results in an approximation of knowledge between spectators and characters. This is only exceptionally the case if the main character suffers from short-term memory loss (as in MEMENTO)⁹ or has parts of his memory erased (as in ETERNAL SUNSHINE OF THE SPOTLESS MIND).¹⁰ Third, we find episodic or sustained reversals supposedly imitating the way in which a character remembers past events (ER: HINDSIGHT, ETERNAL SUNSHINE OF THE SPOTLESS MIND and, according to some interpretations, Spiegelgeschichte). In all three cases the spectators or readers are aligned with the main characters as to their knowledge (and partly their perception) while at the same time distanced from all the other characters.¹¹

Backward narration can also lead to a *dissociation* between spectator/reader and character. If the plot presents the scenes of the story in reverse order, at the beginning the characters know much more than the spectators, while at the end the spectators know much more than the characters. The difference in knowledge thus shifts and is eventually inverted, with the additional knowledge the spectators gain from the second episode onwards often being used for effects

8 | For an analysis of narrative perspective I prefer Smith's concept of alignment (1995, 142ff.) to Genette's concept of focalisation (1972, 206ff.). For a critique of the concept of focalisation, see Brüttsch (2011a, 260ff.).

9 | For a detailed analysis of the complex structure of MEMENTO, involving aligning and distancing effects, see Hansen (2011, 172ff.) and Parker (2004).

10 | In both cases the special condition of the protagonist has a disturbing effect on what Ryan (2009, 144f.) calls the "cognitive arrow," an aspect of time's arrow involving the "accumulation of knowledge and memories at the expense of the unknown".

11 | The alignment is of course never complete but always an approximation, as MEMENTO illustrates well, since the shared lack of knowledge between spectator and protagonist about what happened in the immediate past stands in opposition to differences in knowledge about the future and the distant past.

of dramatic irony (see Hansen 2011, 174). The final episode of BAKHA SATANG (set at the beginning of the story) illustrates this quite well: The main character meets his future wife near a railway bridge and tells her that he has the feeling of already having been in this place. She replies that she hopes this is a good sign. For us as spectators, the place really is a *déjà vu*, but implying a bad rather than a good omen, since in the first scene (set at the end of the story) we witnessed the protagonist throwing himself in front of an approaching train on this same bridge. Similar effects of dramatic irony based on an asymmetrical distribution of knowledge can be found in BETRAYAL (both in play and film), MEMENTO, IRREVERSIBLE and SYX2.

A different form of distancing occurs if a character narrator relates the events of the story as if they unfold in normal forward chronology, while we interpret them as moving backwards. This is the case in the novel *Time's Arrow* and in the film STASTNY KONEC, as the following two excerpts illustrate:

"I can't tell—and I need to know—whether Tod is kind. Or how unkind. He takes toys from children, on the street. He does. The kid will be standing there, with flustered mother, with big dad. Tod'll come on up. The toy, the squeaky duck or whatever, will be offered to him by the smiling child. Tod takes it. And backs away, with what I believe is called a shiteating grin. The child's face turns bland, or closes. Both toy and smile are gone: he takes both toy and smile. Then he heads for the store, to cash it in. For what? A couple of bucks. Can you believe this guy? He'll take candy from a baby, if there's fifty cents in it for him." (Amis 1992, 22f.)

A fight is going on between Bedrich and his wife, accompanied by his voice-over: "And finally I've heard her first sweet words." On the street downstairs an ambulance approaches backwards. The paramedics unload a man and put him down on the street, from where he is suddenly lifted up and comes flying in through the window into the apartment of the quarrelling couple. The voice-over resumes: "Then I realised that life is full of tricky surprises. Instead of enjoying the first pleasant afternoon with Julia, something totally unexpected happened. That dandy showed up [...]. With symptomatic arrogance flown in through the window [...]." The intruder lands in the arms of Bedrich and then the two start moving swiftly around in the bedroom which as a result of their action changes from chaos to order, with the voice-over commenting: "I forced him to help me with the tidying up" (STASTNY KONEC, 19'-21').

In both instances, we reverse the backward narration drawing on our real-world knowledge (which includes forward movement and chronological progress as default values) and recognise, contrary to the character narrators, an act of donation in the first example and a fierce brawl between the two men with fatal consequences for the husband's rival (and the bedroom furnishings) in the second example. This form of narration can be called *unreliable*, with the

explicit statement of the character narrator marking an ironic contrast to the implicit message of the text as a whole.¹²

DIS- AND RE-ORIENTATION

After having sketched a typology of backward narrations and its implications on narrative perspective, I shall now examine more closely the process of reception. In doing so, I will focus on the disorienting potential of narrative reversals, while also pointing to elements of guidance and (re-)orientation.

Disorienting effects can above all be attributed to different kinds of discrepancies between:

- explicit backward and forward accounts or depictions;
- explicit backward accounts and the implicit forward norm;
- forward interpretations of character narrators and backward interpretations by the narratees;
- the character's and the narratee's levels of knowledge;
- the action on the film set and within the fictional world.¹³

Furthermore, as already noted, the reversal is selective in most cases, affecting only some of the characters and only some aspects of time's arrow. The spectators or readers are thus confronted with contrary developments or movements which complicate the understanding of what is going on in the story.

Despite the above mentioned effects of disorientation, I would argue that only few backward narrations try to confuse readers or spectators in a sustained manner, as is indicated by the establishment of various devices aiding orientation. First of all, the backwards pattern is often clearly emphasised through captions indicating time and date or other explicit clues in episodically reversed narratives, and through the staging of events which clearly show or symbolise the reversal at the very beginning of sustained reversed narratives (such as the

¹² | In literary theory the term 'unreliable narration' is mainly used for ironic distancing, as mentioned above. In film theory, however, many authors rather use it for films giving false leads and ending in final plot twists (see Brüttsch 2011b). That backward narration also qualifies for the latter dramatic structure can be illustrated by *MEMENTO*, which despite its partial reversal of chronology ends in a final plot twist unexpectedly forcing us to re-evaluate the main character and his behaviour.

¹³ | In watching *NIE SOLO SEIN*, *RÜCKWÄRTS*, or *EVOL* featuring protagonists who move forwards while all the other characters move backwards, one cannot help imagining the shooting of the film, during which the movements were staged in the opposite direction, of course.

smoke absorbing cigarette in *REWIND* and the watch hand moving counter-clockwise in *THE X FILES: REDRUM*). In both variants, hints as to the kind of reversal may also be provided by dialogue or a voice-over. Moreover, the title often alludes to the backwards structure, either semantically (*Spiegelgeschichte* (= Mirror Story), *Counter-Clock World*, *Time's Arrow*, *BEFORE AND AFTER*, *RÜCKWÄRTS* (= Backwards), *REWIND*) or, in the case of anagrams, formally (*EVOL*, *REDRUM*, *TIBEAR*, *NIE SOLO SEIN*).

Orientation may further be facilitated if the narrative focus is on events evolving according to a predictable pattern, as for instance with the relationship of a couple and the typical stages of falling in love, getting married, having children, having affairs, followed by disaffection and separation (*BETRAYAL*, 5x2, *STASTNY KONEC*), or biographies with the usual steps of birth, childhood, school, entering professional life, starting a family, retirement, old age and death (*Good-bye to the Past*, *Christopher Homm*, *STASTNY KONEC*, *Spiegelgeschichte*, *Time's Arrow*, *Stuart—A Life Backwards*). A chain of events with strong causality—revenge following injustice (*MEMENTO* and *IRREVERSIBLE*) or escape and hideout following the commitment of a crime (*Time's Arrow*)—also helps reconstruct the forward logic of actions presented backwards. And despite the fact that backward narrations may vary as to their perspective and temporal structure, they usually focus on a clearly established main character whose actions, even if reversed, run through the story as a continuous thread.

Last but not least, the dramatic structure of backward narrations, which only rarely differ radically from the established patterns of conventional narratives, also proves to be more often orienting than disorienting: Questions raised in the setup are generally answered not until the resolution, and suspense may classically build towards a final climax (as in *MEMENTO*, *Time's Arrow* and *REWIND*).¹⁴ And if events are reversed in the fictional world, classical plots with goal oriented protagonists having to overcome obstacles in order to achieve what they want are possible, the only difference being that their objective—e.g. adjustment to counter-clock logic (*RÜCKWÄRTS*, *NIE SOLO SEIN*) or the undoing of an

¹⁴ | See Bordwell's analysis of *MEMENTO* (2006, 79f.). Bildhauer's account (2007), on the other hand, appears to be problematic (at least her chart on page 85) insofar as her analysis is based on the story in chronological order whereas what is actually called for is a plot analysis. Thus she takes the strangling of Jimmy at the end of the film to be the midpoint (because it happens in the middle of the story) and the shooting of Teddy at the beginning of the film to be the climax (because it is the last action in the story chronology). If dramatic structure is meant to assess the dynamics and effects of narrative mediation, the latter action clearly functions as the climax and the former as a beginning in medias res or as a hook. The problem becomes even more visible in Matthias' analysis (2012, 182ff.) claiming that *MEMENTO* is conventionally divided into three parts but progressing from third to first act.

action having caused disaster (THE X FILES: REDRUM, STAR TREK: VOYAGER: BEFORE AND AFTER)—lies in the past instead of the future.

Furthermore, narrative beginnings and endings are often clearly signposted and staged conventionally, despite corresponding to the opposite ends of the story. In the first episode of the short film *REWIND*, as described above, the camera slowly discovers the scene and the characters involved who at the same time are explicitly introduced by the voice-over and with captions revealing their names. Although what is shown is the last action of the story, in many ways the scene functions as classical exposition. And the final shot of *xyz*, depicting the two main characters swimming in the sea at sunset (which marks the beginning of their relationship) signals the end of the narration through a conventional long shot and hence spatial dissociation, aided by the dimming of the image, the sunset symbolising the end of the day, and the grand finale on the soundtrack—a romantic conclusion obviously (as in *IRREVERSIBLE* and *BAKHA SATANG*) in ironic contrast to the dreadful ending of the story shown at the beginning of the film.

RENEGOTIATING FAMILIAR TOPICS

What are the themes that backward narratives focus on? Traumatic events from the past often play a crucial role, causing retrospection or repression, raising questions of guilt and atonement or prompting the desire to cancel out what has happened. Free will versus determinism and chance versus fate are topics also privileged by the reversal of chronology.¹⁵ In this context it is worth noting that the possibility of fiction to reverse chronology by contrast foregrounds the unrelenting progress of time in our own world. Accordingly, links between cause and effect, consequences of certain actions and the liability for one's behaviour gain particular significance. The option to go back and undo past events, more or less explicitly displayed in *Spiegelgeschichte*, *Time's Arrow*, *STAR TREK: VOYAGER: BEFORE AND AFTER* and *THE X FILES: REDRUM*, brings the idea of a second chance into play and thus adds a utopian aspect to these stories.

Besides foregrounding issues related to time and causality, narrative reversals may also subvert standard patterns of reception as triggered by certain motifs. Revenge is a good example for illustrating this. In fiction and especially film, we are quite ready to approve of acts of revenge, even of a highly violent kind, as long as they function as retribution for severe crimes such as the assault on defenceless wives and children. However, if the act of revenge is shown *before* we know what caused it (as in *MEMENTO* and *IRREVERSIBLE*), the necessary precondition for empathy and approval is missing and cannot easily be established after the fact, even if the cause is eventually clarified. Without emotional gratification,

¹⁵ | See the analysis of *IRREVERSIBLE* by Hansen (2011, 175ff.).

the concept of revenge is fundamentally put into question, even more so if it turns out that the wrong character has been the target, as is the case in the two films mentioned above (see Stiglegger 33ff.).¹⁶

Repetition is another interesting issue prone to reformulation by episodic reversals. *MEMENTO* seemingly obeys the classical pattern of a hero pursuing a clearly defined goal. At the end, however, it not only appears that Leonard's objective (vengeance for the murder of his wife) might not be justified after all, but also that—even according to his own logic—it has already long ago been achieved, every new attempt being a self-deception in which he takes advantage of his short-term memory loss. The twist at the end of the film thus reveals that the alleged “showdown” in the story presented at the beginning of the film (where, in retrospect, revenge finally seems achieved), in fact just represents one of countless acts of self-delusion, providing the pathological protagonist with only a brief moment of satisfaction. Leonard is caught in an endless loop always leading to the same point, regardless of whether the cycle runs forward or backward.

ETERNAL SUNSHINE OF THE SPOTLESS MIND has a similar structure—with one significant exception: Its narration also and surprisingly reveals after some time that the protagonists have already lived through what they are about to do at the beginning of the film (= at the end of the story), i.e. fall in love with each other and begin a relationship. They also have consciously chosen to erase every trace and memory of their previous love affair, however unlike Leonard not with the intention of doing the same thing again, but on the contrary out of the desire to start a new life without their former lovers. Contrary to *MEMENTO*, the self-deception fails and the two protagonists get together again. Giving love a second chance, repetition thus emerges as a positive force in *ETERNAL SUNSHINE OF THE SPOTLESS MIND*, while in *MEMENTO* it signifies endless recurrence and immobility, with all the concurrent negative connotations.

In general it can be said that backward narrations—at least the sophisticated ones—try to establish a link between structure and content, usually by connecting the formal with a content-related reversal concerning issues like moral judgement (*Time's Arrow*), society and its behavioural norms (*RÜCKWÄRTS*), the relation between offender and victim (*Time's Arrow*, *BETRAYAL*, *MEMENTO*), or disparities of knowledge and power between antagonistic characters (*BETRAYAL*).

BACKWARD NARRATION AND GENRE

Narrative reversals tend to favour new approaches not only to familiar topics but also to well-established genres. My list of examples includes the following

¹⁶ | A close analysis of both films is presented in Hansen (2011, 172ff.).

genres (which are not strictly exclusive categories, as the multiple entries indicate): science fiction (*Counter-Clock World*, *STAR TREK: VOYAGER: BEFORE AND AFTER*, *RED DWARF: BACKWARDS*, *SLIDERS: AS TIME GOES BY*), crime and psychological thrillers (*THE X FILES: REDRUM*, *MEMENTO*, *REWIND*), romantic comedies (*STASTNY KONEC*, *NIE SOLO SEIN*, *SEINFELD: BETRAYAL*, *EVOL*, *ETERNAL SUNSHINE OF THE SPOTLESS MIND*), romantic drama (*Spiegelgeschichte*, *BETRAYAL*, *Time's Arrow*, *TWO FRIENDS*, *MEMENTO*, *IRREVERSIBLE*, *BAKHA SATANG*, 5x2, *ETERNAL SUNSHINE OF THE SPOTLESS MIND*, *THE CURIOUS CASE OF BENJAMIN BUTTON*) and political allegory (*Time's Arrow*, *STASTNY KONEC*, *RÜCKWÄRTS*, *TIBBAR*, *BAKHA SATANG*, *KILLING THE CHICKENS TO SCARE THE MONKEYS*).

Works of science fiction usually feature at least one supernatural element not (yet) known to our own world, but accounted for within the diegesis by pseudo-scientific explanations (see Spiegel 2007: 42ff.). Temporal reversal, whether affecting all the characters (*Counter-Clock World*), only the protagonist (*STAR TREK: VOYAGER: BEFORE AND AFTER*), or only the inhabitants of our planet (*RED DWARF: BACKWARDS*) is an instance of such a fantastic element which functions, especially in combination with a futuristic setting, as a typical marker of the genre. It is worthwhile noting in this context that the above mentioned examples ought to be called 'counter-clock worlds' (the title of Dick's novel) rather than backward narratives, since the narration simply adheres to the prevailing chronology within the diegesis, even if it moves in the 'wrong' direction.

Narrative reversals also suit crime fiction well. Many examples of this genre, featuring a detective trying to find out how or by whom the crime shown at the beginning was committed, are geared towards the past anyway. And they are often explicitly designed as a mystery, an aspect necessarily reinforced by the cognitively challenging episodic reversal. However, if the chronology is reversed, the questions raised differ from what we are used to. Thus, as to the punishment of the putative culprit at the beginning, *MEMENTO* prompts the spectators to ask: What was the crime? Has the right person been caught? And later on, as contradictions emerge: Did the crime really happen as the main character claims it did? The beginning of *THE X FILES: REDRUM* shows the main character in prison, unable to recall any crime and in addition moving back in time, which also raises a number of questions: What happened? Who other than the protagonist could be responsible for the crime? Will he succeed in altering the past in such a way that the criminal act can be prevented from happening?

The initially mentioned classroom laughter and amusement triggered by movies played in rewind mode indicates the opportunities that backward narrations also offer for comedies, especially if they feature sustained reversals taking place within the fictional world (variant 2b in table 1). The burlesque effect of

reverse motion with its peculiar visual appearance¹⁷ is often combined with content-related humour. In *NIE SOLO SEIN* and *RÜCKWÄRTS*, the comic effect derives from the difficulties of the main characters (who 'behave' in ordinary forward fashion) in adjusting to a counter-clock world. Thus the thirsty protagonist of the former movie faces the problem that full bottles can only be *returned* at the beverage stand, while in the places where people get them—from dustbins and garbage bags—they are empty. For this reason, he is able to quench his thirst only after finding a girl who fills him a glass by 'drinking' it backwards.

The episodic reversal can also be used for comic effect. *SEINFELD: BETRAYAL* (a parody of Pinter's play and its film adaptation) features several 'inverted' running gags of odd behaviour which are repeated throughout the episode (such as Jason refusing to go to the toilet) and explained only at the very end. Moreover, dialogue episodically reversed, even in narratives with otherwise sustained reversals, is bound to amuse through ambiguity, as the following exchange taken from *STASTNY KONEC* between the female protagonist and her cousin demonstrates: Julia (standing in the door of her apartment): "It's a little messy around."—Cousin: "It means you're alone."—Julia: "Pig."—Cousin: "Calf?"—Julia: "Hubby [her husband] went to relatives. To butcher."

Another source of comic effects are discrepancies between the comments of a character narrator who misinterprets the reversed action as ordinary forward movement and the knowledge of the spectator or reader. This results in irony typical of unreliable narration, as the above references to *Time's Arrow* and *STASTNY KONEC* have shown.

Backward narrated dramas often focus on the relationship between a couple of friends or lovers. In this context, the order of affection and disaffection is reversed—a constellation of particular interest regarding the emotional involvement of the spectators, who alternate between emphatic alignment and distanced observation. On the one hand, emotional engagement is possible because romantic dramas build, as already mentioned, on familiar evolutionary stages in the lovers' relationship which are easily recognised even if presented in reverse order. On the other hand, the audience's superior knowledge from the second episode on has a distancing effect, which is even stronger if the chronological reversal is accompanied by other 'rules' of staging which foreground the act of narration, such as the 'interdiction' to cut within episodes of *IRREVERSIBLE*.

17 | Already the Lumière Brothers relied on this effect when they had their travelling cameraman stop the projector after screening *DÉMOLITION D'UN MUR* (*DEMOLITION OF A WALL*, France 1896, Louis Lumière) and rerun it backwards (as mentioned in the audio commentary on the DVD "Early Cinema: Primitives and Pioneers," British Film Institute, 2005). Other early examples are *AVENUE DE L'OPÉRA* (France 1900, Alice Guy) and *PLONGEUR FANTASTIQUE* (*THE FANTASTIC DIVER*, France 1905, Segundo de Chomón).

or the depiction of the couple's life in 5x2 through five key episodes of approximately equal length.¹⁸

Apart from establishing futuristic worlds, mysteries, comic entanglements and dramatic conflicts between lovers, the reversal of familiar procedures may also challenge our norms of perception and cognition, an effect which can be used to add a political dimension to the plot. Thus in *TIBBAR*, the depiction of intensive live stock farming, familiar to everybody from TV documentaries, appears as a striking symbol of unnaturalness and perversity, but only due to the reversal of the image and sound track. In *RÜCKWÄRTS*, the clash of norms of opposing forward and backward movements, besides being highly entertaining, also serves as a critique of conformism ruling West German society in the early 1980s. *STÄSTNY KONEC*, produced during the Prague Spring, takes the liberty of a few side blows to the communist regime, for instance by permanently (rather than episodically) reversing the dialogue of official speeches and the reading of law orders, which are thereby transformed into incomprehensible gibberish. And *Time's Arrow*, in providing a striking new perspective on the perversity of Nazi ideology through its combined reversal of time and ethics, also calls for an allegorical and political reading.

Apart from these effects, backward narrations in all genres self-reflexively point towards films and novels being artefacts, with reversals on the level of plot (variants 1a and b) foregrounding narrativity and those within the diegesis (variants 2a and b) foregrounding fictionality.¹⁹

VERBAL VERSUS AUDIOVISUAL REVERSALS

So far I have dealt with films and novels as if there were no fundamental differences between filmic and literary backward narrations. As to episodic reversals, I would argue that in one sense, differences are indeed negligible, since the narrative structure (reversal of the order of episodes but chronological unfolding within each episode) works comparably and with similar effects. In sustained reversals however, there are considerable differences, since in addition to the narrative structure, the systems of representation (which function differently

18 | In addition to chronology, 5x2 also reverses expected patterns of behaviour, as illustrated by the sexual intercourse on the day of the couple's divorce instead of their wedding.

19 | In *My Cheatin' Heart* (S3/E07) from the TV series *Home Movies* (USA 1999–2004, UPN/Cartoon Network), featuring would-be film director Brendon trying to shoot a script telling its story backwards, self-reflexivity is highly explicit, since the comic effect of the episode owes much to the constant discussions between Brendon and his friends about the (im)possibility of chronological inversion.

in the two media) are directly affected by the backward movement. Due to their mechanical and iconic bases, audiovisual representations can automatically be reversed, an option not available to verbal representation.²⁰ For this reason, as Chatman (2009, 35ff.) has shown in detail, sustained reversals in literary narration depend heavily on the semantic reversal of verbs ("give" turns into "take from", "make a mess" into "tidy up"), prepositions ("out" → "in") and, in some cases, adjectives ("last" → "first") and nouns ("destroyer" → "healer"). Chatman calls this linguistic procedure "antonymising" and points to the fact that it only applies to process statements and not to stasis statements, since only the former are time-sensitive.²¹

Reversing audiovisual representations, on the other hand, raises the question of how to handle the sound track. Contrary to the objects represented in the image, dialogue, music and sounds, if played backwards, usually change in such a manner as to become unintelligible. Films can purposefully make use of this estrangement (*TIBBAR*, *REWIND*, *RED DWARF: BACKWARDS*) or avoid it by adding synchronised "forward" sounds (*STÄSTNY KONEC*, *REWIND*).²²

A CHALLENGE FOR NARRATOLOGY AND SCREENWRITING THEORY

Narrative theory has, especially in recent years and partly due to a movement called "unnatural narratology" (see Alber 2009), shifted attention from classical to experimental forms of narration that defy accepted norms and conventions. Regarding film analysis, dramatic theory and screenplay manuals in the last decade have also increasingly focused on alternative and complex structures of storytelling.²³ In this context, backward narrations have been treated or mentioned on occasion (Richardson 2002, 49f.; Alber 2011, 5; Hansen, 2011; Benke 2002,

20 | Phonetically reversing verbal utterances would be the literary equivalent to playing image and sound track in reverse mode. *Time's Arrow* uses this method ("dug" for "good" or "sttthb" for "bitch"), but for reasons of intelligibility only in some very short passages (see Chatman 2009, 36).

21 | By considering the possibility of anonymising actions such as laughing (2009, 43), Chatman disregards that time reversals are not always linked to semantic reversals: "to buy" backwards equals "to cash in," but "to laugh" backwards does not equal "crying".

22 | In *RÜCKWÄRTS* only the dialogue but not the sounds are reversed. All examples mentioned above with the exception of *REWIND* feature non-diegetic music played in standard forward fashion.

23 | Both trends were inspired by corresponding developments in literature and film, such as experiments in postmodern literature or the success of unconventional storytelling in independent film productions of the 1990s.

83f./266ff.; Bildhauer 2007, 82ff.; Krützen 2010, 267ff.)—for good reasons, since their deviant structure raises tricky questions in both fields. If it makes sense to call them “unnatural,” this depends not only on the definition of this (ambiguous) term²⁴, but also on the kind of reversal in question. Brian Richardson, by claiming that “antonymic” temporality (as well as “circular,” “contradictory,” “differential,” “conflated” and “multiple” temporality), generally leads to the construction of “impossible stories” (2002, 53), neglects (in his otherwise very useful study) that this only holds true for time reversals taking place within the story (variants 1a and b in my table 1) and not for those carried out on the level of narrative discourse (variants 2a and b). In these latter instances, the story told may very well entirely adhere to the norms of our world and may even appear realistic (as in the marital drama 5x2), even though the way it is told proves to be unconventional.

For screenwriting theory, backward narrations are also interesting, not least because they expose the shortcomings of concepts that not sufficiently distinguish between the dynamics of plot and story (demanding, for instance, that the inciting incident should not only set the narrative in motion, but also the protagonist, and that in the climax suspense should rise to a peak not only for the spectators, but also for the characters within the diegesis). Episodic reversals demonstrate on the one hand that other options are available, and on the other that classical dramatic patterns can be established without relying on this kind of correlation between plot and story.

SHORT BLOSSOMING OF AN EXTRAORDINARY NARRATIVE FORM

Works like *Goodbye to the Past* (1934), *Spiegelgeschichte* (1949), STASTNY KONEC (1967) or BETRAYAL (1983) indicate that backward narrations have existed long before the 1990s. Nevertheless, the turn of the millennium saw in both film and television a noticeable increase of this form. What might be the reasons for this? First, a general trend in the 1990s towards more complex and demanding forms of narration not only in movies (see Buckland 2009), but also in quality TV series (see Mittell 2006 and Blanchet 2011). Second, the growing importance since then of secondary releases on DVD, which particularly offered interesting returns for demanding films which provided new insights on multiple viewings. Third, the internet as a new medium particularly apt for the promotion of

24 | Depending on the context, “unnatural” is used to qualify forms of narration judged as experimental, unconventional, antimimetic, antirealist, unusual or impossible. Apart from the fact that the variety of works thus embraced is quite large, qualifications of this kind, which are relative in nature, call for careful definitions of concepts such as realism or mimesis (see Hansen 2011, 163ff.).

innovative and enigmatic films and series through special sites and discussion forums. And fourth, the successes of SEINFELD: BETRAYAL and MEMENTO with both critics and spectators, which subsequently boosted similar projects.

Despite their short blossoming, backward narrations have remained marginal. On the one hand, they are too odd and experimental for mainstream adaptation, while on the other their structure is so constraining that even artistically ambitious writers and producers only rely on it in very special instances. If they do, it may well be worth their while, however, as *Time's Arrow* and MEMENTO, to name only two outstanding examples, convincingly demonstrate—not least because of their clever play with orienting and disorienting effects.

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- BETRAYAL (UK 1983, David Hugh Jones)
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- TWO FRIENDS (Australia 1986, Jane Campion)

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- EVOL (UK 2006, Chris Vincze)
- KILLING THE CHICKENS TO SCARE THE MONKEYS (Sweden 2011, Jens Assur)
- NIE SOLO SEIN (Germany 2003, Jan Schomburg)
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- REWIND (India 2007, Atul Talsheke)
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SEINFELD (USA 1989–1998, NBC; S9/E08: *BETRAYAL*, 1997)
SLIDERS (USA 1995–2000, FOX/Sci Fi Channel; S2/E13: *As Time Goes By*, 1996)
STAR TREK: VOYAGER (USA 1995–2001, UPN; S3/E21: *BEFORE AND AFTER*, 1997)
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IMAGE SOURCES

Figure 1: Table by Matthias Brüttsch.

APPENDIX

JULIA ECKEL, BERND LEIENDECKER,
DANIELA OLEK, CHRISTINE PIEPIORKA (EDS.)

(Dis)Orienting Media and Narrative Mazes

[transcript]

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